



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Fl., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Telephone: 617 349 4683 Fax: 617 349 3116 TTY: 617 349 6112

E-mail: histcomm@cambridgema.gov URL: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic>

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Date: August 29, 2006

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: Case D-1076: Moses Ward House, 127-129 Elm St. (1838)

An application to demolish the double house at 127-129 Elm Street was received on August 16, 2006. The proponents were notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for September 7.

Current Conditions

The double house occupies a 5,379-square foot lot (Map 86, Lot 21) on the west side of Elm Street, near Hampshire Street. The zoning is Residence C-1, which allows multi-family residential construction with an FAR allowance of 0.75, a height limit of 35 feet, and 1500 square feet of lot area per dwelling unit. The house is situated toward the front of the lot and a small gravel driveway and parking pad are located on the left (south) side of the house.



127-129 Elm Street, 8/29/06. Photo by Sarah L. Burks.

The applicant proposes to raze the house, which was recently damaged by fire, and to construct three attached townhouses on the lot. The plan and elevation drawings for the proposed project are on file.

The current condition of the house is fair to poor. The applicant indicated that there had been a fire in the building. The ell on the left side of the building has

been shortened and what remains has been stripped down to the sheathing, so that may have been the location of the fire. The proponents can presumably clarify this matter at the hearing. The fascia and gutter at the front elevation is missing, the roofing shingles need replacement, the brick foundation has been badly patched at former window openings and needs to be repointed in most other areas. The chimneys appear to have been removed.

The neighborhood context for this house includes other one- to three-family houses of the mid to late nineteenth century situated on moderately-sized lots. The neighboring residences include a double house at #119-121 with a second residence in the rear yard and a two-family residence at #133. Across the street are a Bracketed Italianate building at #130 and a couple of triple deckers. All the surrounding buildings are taller than the house at 127-129 Elm Street.

Architectural Description

The Moses Ward House is a 1½-story frame building with a gable roof, oriented flank side toward the street. The double house is supported on a high brick foundation. The house is an example of the late Federal style transitioning to the Greek Revival. One Federal style detail is the very slight overhang of the cornices over the walls. This cornice overhang would become more prominent in the following decades during the Greek Revival period.

The house is of a type A plan with a center hall and two chimneys, one on either side of the house. The house may have originally been constructed as a single-family residence. It has a single door and it would be difficult to accommodate two stairs in the center hall. The entrance door is a wood six-panel door, but neither it nor the pilastered surround with side lights appear to be original. The configuration, however, is consistent with what was there originally. The survey photograph (see below) illustrates a wider paneled door with sidelights and a detailed Greek Revival trim surround including fluted pilasters and cornice. A small porch from the 1920s that appears on the survey photograph is no longer there but was replaced with a steel landing and steel steps, with an ornamental steel railing that matches the front fence.



127-129 Elm Street, ca. 1966. CHC survey photo.

The house is covered with wood shingles, which might obscure other architectural features such as a frieze board or the dimension of the original corner boards, which at present are only about 5" wide. The façade was originally organized into five bays with two double hung windows on either side of the entry door. None of the original 6-over-6 windows remain on the visible elevations. The existing windows are a mixture of wood and vinyl replacements. The existing windows on the façade are two large four-panel bay windows are located on either side of the entry. Other alterations have included renovations in 1997 consisting of new windows, interior alterations, and electrical and plumbing work.

History

Prior to 1800, Cambridgeport was a sparsely-inhabited farming community. While agricultural activity dominated the higher dry ground, marshes and mud flats extended along the edges of the Charles River and inland. With the construction of the West Boston Bridge in 1793 (where the Longfellow Bridge now stands), there was direct access to present-day Kendall Square from Boston. Cambridgeport soon developed as a residential suburb and as a commercial link between Boston and the long-standing farming communities. Land became more desirable and valuable in this part of Cambridgeport following the construction of the bridge.

Cambridgeport was declared a United States port of delivery in 1805, which contributed to the original canal-oriented street and building lot pattern. Two major thoroughfares, Broadway and Hampshire Street, connected the active port area to the inland towns of Cambridge. However, Cambridgeport failed to live up to its potential as a great commercial city, and subsequently evolved into a Boston-oriented commercial suburb, thanks in part to a boom in manufacturing activity in East Cambridge. Small-scale manufacturing, such as confectionary and box-making, was predominant in Cambridgeport during the early to mid-1800s.

Elm Street was originally laid out and named in 1805. The street was extended twice, from Broadway to Cambridge Street in the 1830s and from Cambridge Street to Webster Avenue by 1859. Though primarily a residential street, a large cracker bakery, Thurston Hall & Co., was located mid-block on the same side of the street as #127-129. It was an active factory during the nineteenth century but was demolished in 1903 for the construction of the Fletcher School.

The property at 127-129 Elm Street was purchased by Moses Ward in 1837, and he had completed construction on the house by the following year. Ward, in turn, sold the property to William and Edward Davis in 1847.

The house changed ownership and tenancy frequently. One of the longer-term owners was John Campbell, who owned it for about 20 years (ca. 1885-1905) but did not live there himself, instead renting it out to other tenants. In the twentieth century, Manuel Simoes owned the property from about 1920 to 1950. He is listed first as a laborer, then an employee for the Duton-Doten Desk Company.

Significance and Recommendation

The Moses Ward House is architecturally significant as an interesting example of a center hall plan house with transitional stylistic features of the late Federal period and early Greek Revival. It has been extensively altered, but maintains its characteristic massing and relationship to the street. It dates to the earliest period of development in this block of Elm Street. The house also is associated with the broad social history of the city for its associations with the resident working class families. For these reasons, the staff recommends that 127-129 Elm Street be found significant.

cc: Joquim Couto
Martha Bedrosian



Property Map for 129 Elm St., Cambridge Property Database. Printed 8/30/06